DiGIAMMARINO WINS FIRST LATE MODEL MAIN...THREE WINNING STREAKS END & TWO CONTINUE

by Tim Kennedy

The weather was hotter than a 4th of July firecracker and so was the five-division, six-main event competition Saturday at Irwindale Speedway on Advantage Ford Fireworks Night. Following a 100-degree day, drivers raced in the mid-80s at sunset. More than 6,500 spectators made the event the 14th sellout at the eight-year old facility and the first since the holiday weekend race on July 2 last year. The final checkered flag flew at 10:10 p.m after Dan DiGiammarino won his first Auto Club Late Model 40-lap main event in the featured division of the evening on the banked half-mile. A 15-minute aerial fireworks show followed for the enthusiastic audience.

Winning streaks ended in three of the five series and continued in two series. Rick Crow started last and won his third consecutive Justice Brothers Pure Stock oval main in a 15-car, 25-lap race on the third-mile. He came back later to win an eight-car Pure Stock Figure 8 ten-lap race in his same 1972 Chevy Chevelle, which is painted all pink to honor his late mother who succumbed to cancer. Both pure stock mains were all green flag runs. Crow 's feature victory total at IS rests at half a dozen, with all six coming this season. The Saugus Speedway veteran's total includes two Figure 8 triumphs in his pink car. Young gun Andrew Anderson won his third straight Briggs & Stratton-powered Bandolero Cars 20-lap race on the third-mile.

DiGiammarino, 35, started third in his 2005 Chevy Monte Carlo and won the feature by 15-yards (0.832 officially). He finished a career-best second two weeks ago and earned $1,000 for his initial victory. DiGiammarino also won a "Dash for Cash" for the six fastest qualifiers, starting first as sixth quickest and leading all six laps. The San Bernardino resident became the first Late Model feature winner other than Tim Huddleston, the 2005 series champion, and Travis Thirkettle, the 2006 point leader, in 18 races. Their personal stranglehold on first place dated to April 16, 2005 when rookie Austin Grabowski won a L/M main. Since that date Huddleston scored eight triumphs and Thirkettle won ten, including the last five features.

Fastest qualifier Greg Crutcher started second and ended the Vista Paint Super Stock winning streak of Bryan Harrell at four in a row. Point leader Harrell has won six of eight mains this season. The two Camaro drivers battled closely all 30-laps on the half-mile. Crutcher, who won his last S/S feature on the Independence Day weekend last year, benefited by a lap 28 caution. Harrell started first, led the first 27 laps and held a five-yard advantage when a single car spinout caused a caution flag. Inside-running Crutcher passed outside-running Harrell through the third and fourth turns on lap 28. He edged Harrell by half a length on each of the final three laps. Crutcher's winning margin was 0.222 over Harrell in a 21-car field.

Tom Landreth, the four-time Legend Cars track champion and current point leader, returned to his winning ways after skipping the last race to attend NASCAR races at Infineon Raceway in Sonoma. The 36-year old driver set fast time in a 36-car field and started second with a two-car inversion. He spotted pole-sitter K. J. Garrison the lead for five laps and then led the final 25 laps. He recorded his fifth victory in seven races to date. He also ended the two in a row run by Grabowski, who doubles in Legend and Late Models. Grabowski, a Damien High School senior in September, dropped rookie Garrison to third with an inside pass in turn two on the final lap.

The 23-car Late Model feature had an eight-car inverted start with Huddleston on the pole

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and Grabowski alongside in the first row in their rebuilt cars following a 15-car crash in the June 17 feature. Grabowski led the initial start but a three-car crash on the backstretch eliminated the cars of Brent Jones and Scott Youngren. Jason Bowles rejoined the field at the back for the restart. Grabowski again shot into the lead and paced the first 14 laps. DiGiammarino passed Huddleston for second on lap three. Fastest qualifier Thirkettle, enjoying a career year, started eighth and used the lowest groove to shoot past contenders. He was seventh on lap two, sixth on lap five and fourth three laps later. Thirkettle passed his High-Point Distributing co-worker Huddleston for third on the inside in turn one during lap 11. He chased DiGiammarino to lap 13 when he dropped the eventual winner to third via an inside pass in the third turn. Thirkettle dueled Grabowski to lap 15 when he used another inside second turn pass to assume command. DiGiammarino took second from Grabowski on lap 18 as Thirkettle extended his lead to 40-yards by lap 22, when a two-car spin in turn four caused a caution flag. Thirkettle had reopened a 30-yard advantage by lap 26 when a stalled car caused another caution.

On the lap 26 restart for 19 remaining cars, Thirkettle's Monte Carlo transmission broke when the green flag waved as he shifted into high gear. Cars scattered to the left and right of the slowing leader. All cars continued but some shattered body-work from one car littered the front straight after cars took evasive action. DiGiammarino inherited the lead as Thirkettle continued at a reduced speed in a lower gear at the bottom of the track. The former leader pulled to the infield and returned eight laps off the pace to the finish. Inside runner Huddleston and outside-running Grabowski ran side by side from lap 26-40 without touching. They traded second position five times before Huddleston passed the youngster on the inside from turn four to the finish line on the last lap. Huddleston edged Grabowski by 0.077. "After wrecking two cars in recent races here second place feels like a victory," Huddleston said. He added that the top three finishers were all built by Race Car Factory, as was the "hard charger award" car of Michael Wright. Nick Joanides, Mike Johnson, rookie Wright, Richie Altman, rookie Aaron Staudinger, Daniel DiGiacomo and Craig Yeaton completed the top ten. Eighteen cars, including Thirkettle, finished, with 16 on the lead lap in a 26-minute event.

With 36 Legend Cars among the 105-cars in the pits, the top 24 qualifiers went directly to the main. A 12-car, 12-lap semi-main sent the first six finishers to the final three rows of the 15-row, 30-lap race. An eight-car crash on the opening lap of the feature in the first turn sidelined five cars. Third fastest qualifier Connor Cantrell, 15, entered the race second in points, only two behind leader Landreth. The 2005 Legends rookie of the year dropped out of third place under the first lap caution and was towed to the pits, inflicting major damage to his championship aspirations. Female racer Lindsey King, 17, Gary Scheuerell, Matt Lundstrum, 18-year old visitor from Washington state, Chad Schug, gal racer Bree Brewer, 16, Bob Landreth and Tom Skahill rounded out the top ten. Twenty drivers finished and 17 ran all 30 laps.

Hard chargers selected by race control officials were S/S veteran Julianne Seeley (13th to ninth) and L/M rookie Wright (17th to sixth). Special July 4th tributes for the 230th birthday of our nation included parade laps by five race cars at the National Anthem. Each driver extended a United States flag on a pole from his window. Each parading race-car had the name of a military branch lettered on the side of the car. A Pick Your Part-sponsored jet-engine powered dually truck made a demonstration run at reduced speed around the half-mile track with occasional power bursts. Following driver introductions for the Late Model feature, the 23 drivers drove parade laps with each driver holding a pole with an American flag above the roof-line. On one of the parade laps pyrotechnic experts set off a series of colorful aerial fireworks from beyond the backstretch wall. Post-main event patriotic music and an extended aerial fireworks show launched from beyond the backstretch wall entertained the grandstand crowd and passing motorists on the nearby 605 San Gabriel River Freeway.

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